

By Joe Courtney

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I recently visited Preston to see again the hard work that goes into maintaining a family-owned dairy farm. Gerry Grabarek inherited Preston Farms from his grandfather, and has been milking cows since 1972. We talked about the long hours and manpower that farming requires, and the work needed to protect dairy farms and a New England way of life.

Families such as Gerry's have passed on farms and the trade from generation to generation. But farms do more than stimulate the economy, they preserve open space and keep our children healthy.

The Congressional Dairy Farmers Caucus, which I resurrected in response to the crisis of crashing milk prices, includes nearly 100 members — Democrats and Republicans. As its chairman, I've supported farmers and their communities. Dairy farmers have lost money on nearly every gallon of milk they've produced recently, and fighting for the industry is more important than ever.

Obesity rising

Support for dairy farms is not just about what's good for farmers. It's about what's good for the health and well-being of all Americans, particularly children. According to the School Nutrition Association and USDA, dairy products are a uniquely important part of a well-balanced diet, among the most nutritious foods children can have.

In recent years, milk consumption has decreased dramatically. The USDA recommends three servings of milk products daily for children. However, at school, children get only three servings per week. Children are drinking less milk, replacing it with less nutritious options such as soda and sports drinks. Not surprisingly, this trend coincides with an epidemic of childhood obesity driven by an increase in "empty" calorie consumption. Flashy logos and sugar are no

replacement for balanced and nutritious options.

New bill

While we must work to increase the amount of dairy products that children consume, we also must ensure those products are healthy. To that end, I introduced the Healthy Milk and Dairy Choices in Schools Act of 2010, legislation that would ensure schools sell only 1 percent or skim milk — providing the same nutrients as whole milk, but without the fat.

It also establishes a pilot program to replace whole fat cheeses with low-sodium, low-fat alternatives. For lactose-intolerant children, alternative options will be provided.

We must do all we can to help our children improve their eating habits. Any hope of combating obesity, diabetes and other health problems begins with nutritious dining options. And healthy options for our young people begin on eastern Connecticut's dairy farms.

Joe Courtney represents the 2nd Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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